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## Covert effort seen costing US credibility and respect

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WASHINGTON - A number of US, West European and Arab officials privately say they regard still-unfolding revelations of an 18-month effort by the Reagan Administration to curry favor with and favors from "moderate" Iranian leaders as ill-conceived, amateurishly implemented and counterproductive.

### NEWS ANALYSIS

In his televised address on Thursday night, President Reagan listed the objectives of the controversial covert effort as: establishing contact with Iranian officials who would play a more important role in that strategically important country after the demise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, seeking a negotiated end of the six-year Iran-Iraq war, and getting Iran to stop supporting terrorism and to use its influence with pro-Iranian terrorists in Lebanon to free American hostages.

But it appears the effort may instead have set back chances for influencing post-Khomeini Iran by undermining respect for top American officials; prolonged the war by providing key weapons and spare parts that help Tehran to persevere; and encouraged terrorists to grab more American hostages whose value seems to have been significantly increased by the Iranian debacle.

In addition, it can hardly help the administration's credibility with allies when, at the very time it was insisting they do everything in their power to cut off arms sales in order to shorten the war, the United States is discovered to have slipped in some arms directly and sanctioned other shipments by Israel. Nor can moderate Arab nations, who most fear the implications of a possible Iranian victory in its war with Iraq, be anything but shaken by disclosure that the United States is willing to put aside strategic objectives when the freedom of a handful of American hostages is at stake.

An American official with extensive experience in the Persian Gulf said the notion of trying to establish quiet contacts with Iranian leaders was conceptually sound, for many of them were educated in the West, have close relatives living in Europe and the United States and realize that at some point Iran may need the United States to help counterbalance a potential threat from the Soviet Union.

"But I would never have offered weapons, that would be seen as a sign of weakness," he said. "I would have liberalized our policies to allow many more Iranians to be educated here and encouraged wider trade relationships."

"The Iranians are well aware what US diplomats have been saying around the world about the necessity for an arms embargo and never paying ransom for hostages. Instead of building a better relationship, what happened would merely confirm the picture they have always had of American leaders as hypocrites and liars. The respect factor would be gone right there."

In a lengthy White House briefing before Reagan's television address, a senior official told reporters that it was Iranian contacts who insisted the United States provide some weapons and spare parts - as a demonstration of good faith and proof that American envoys were representing the president's views.

At another point the official said provision of small quantities of defensive arms enabled Iranian officials involved in the backstage dealings to show doubters that Iran was getting something out of it.

Could not the administration think of some way to prove its sincerity other than to provide arms? "We could not think of any," the policy maker said.

Intelligence sources say there is ample evidence that Iran is hurting for weapons, spare parts and ammunition to prosecute the war as it would wish. One analyst said that in years past, the Iranians would probe at several points along the front, causing the Iraqis to rush in reserves in one area after another, before launching the major drive someplace else.

While Administration officials have stressed that antitank missiles, which the US provided, are considered "defensive," given the preponderance of Iraqi armor at the front Iraqi commanders would hardly think new supplies of antitank weapons in Iranian hands were anything but offensive.

Similarly, while Reagan emphasized his desire to use the secret dialogue to press for a negotiated settlement of the war, most intelligence reports say that even those Iranian leaders advocating a settlement support one more major offensive to weaken the bargaining position of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Reagan and other officials say their efforts were at least partly successful in that three American hostages were released by their pro-Iranian captors in

Lebanon and that the Iranian government has apparently not been involved in any anti-US terrorism for about a year.

But US intelligence sources believe that Seyyed Mehdi Hashemi, son-in-law of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's heir apparent, was deeply involved in three recent seizures of Americans in Lebanon by a group thought to be pro-Libyan. Hashemi, however, was recently arrested on a variety of charges, including murder, abduction and other "secret, illegal activities."

Donald T. Regan, the president's chief of staff, was asked by reporters Friday why Reagan was so deeply involved in the affair.

"The president brings up the hostages at 90 percent of his meetings [with staff]. Every morning he asks John is there anything new with the hostages?" he said referring to national security adviser John Poindexter.

But doesn't that show a preoccupation with just six lives? he was asked.

"Yes, and that's a damned good thing that the president of the United States has that thing in mind. If you were taken hostage you can rest assured that the president and the government were behind you."